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Asian Americans are People of Color, Too. . .Aren't They?

Cross-Racial Alliances and the Question of Asian American Political Identity

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Introduction

Currently, many Asian American advocacy and community organizing groups engage in a substantial amount of coalition work with other groups of color—from the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium's work with the NAACP and the National Latino Media Coalition to persuade television executives to diversify programming to the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates' campaigns to organize Latino and Korean workers in Los Angeles's Koreatown.[1] The variety of types of cross-racial coalitions in which Asian American organizations participate is striking. Some are national; others are statewide, local, or neighborhood-based. Some focus on promoting or defeating specific laws or initiatives; others on organizing communities to empower themselves. Some are biracial; some are multiracial. Some are ad hoc, temporary, and relatively superficial; others are deep, substantial, and enduring.

Despite these trends, there is a persistent sense among Asian American advocates, activists, and scholars that Asian Americans could and should be doing more in the way of cross-racial work. Through interviews with leading Asian American advocates and activists across the country,[2] I discovered that most make good faith efforts to build and sustain cross-racial alliances—for both normative and practical reasons—within the stringent material constraints imposed upon them.[3] Nevertheless, there are ongoing difficulties that beset this type of work. I focus on one such barrier in this article. I argue that the persistent ambiguity surround-

ing Asian American political identity—the uncertainty about where Asian Americans fit into the racial order, where they stand politically, and whether Asian Americans are really "people of color" or not—sometimes leads other minority groups, especially Blacks, to overlook or distrust them as potential coalition partners, thus complicating the task of coalition building.

Throughout the post-civil rights era, the hallmark of Asian American political identity has been its ambiguity or lack of definition. That Asian Americans sometimes seem almost evenly split among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents is part of the story. But on a deeper level there is a lack of clarity about where Asian Americans stand politically, how they see themselves in relation to Blacks and Latinos, and how oppositional their politics are. Both Blacks and Latinos lean more heavily toward the Democratic Party than do Asians, and on the whole both identify more and are more identified with a progressive agenda for social change and racial and economic justice. As ongoing demographic shifts enlarge the Asian American population and multiply the points at which it comes into competitive, conflicted contact with Blacks and Latinos, the question will become even more urgent: are Asian Americans just trying to close the gap between themselves and Whites, or are they fighting for a broader vision of social justice for all?

The first part of this article explores the ambiguity of Asian American political identity during the post-civil rights era; the second part discusses the impact of this ambiguity upon the formation of cross-racial alliances; the third part spotlights the cross-racial coalition work of two Asian American grassroots organizing groups with highly defined political identities; and the conclusion considers how Asian Americans might think and talk about their political identity in preparation for the challenges of the future.

From *Gong Lum* to Third World Solidarity to *Brian Ho*

To understand Asian American identity choices today, it helps to look back in time. From the start Asian Americans have occupied a highly ambiguous position in American society. When Chinese immigrants first entered the U.S. during the height of national debates over slavery, it was unclear how they fit into the racial order; they were a true racial wild card. Gradually, drawing upon transatlantic ethnological discourses that reliably ranked

Europeans over Asians over Africans, White elites "triangulated" the Chinese vis-à-vis Whites and Blacks, or located them in the racial order with reference to these two anchor points (Kim 1999). On the one hand, Whites valorized the Chinese (and other Asian immigrants) as smarter, more diligent, and more civilized than Blacks. Today's model minority myth is an extension of this original pattern of relative valorization. On the other hand, Whites ostracized Asians as immutably foreign and unassimilable, paving the way for the Chinese exclusion movement and later, the wartime internment of Japanese Americans. Thus, in a racial order defined by the two axes of superior/inferior and insider/foreigner, Asians were positioned between Black and White on the former axis and apart from Black and White on the latter.

Asian immigrants developed a distinctive strategy of political empowerment in response to this ambiguous positioning in the American racial order.[4] While holding tight to their separate nationalistic identities, they claimed to be White or at least not Black for the narrow purpose of making claims to "White" privileges. The Chinese community in California reacted with dismay to *People* v. *George Hall* (1854), which lumped the Chinese with Blacks and Indians, and lobbied extensively to have the decision reversed. When Takao Ozawa asserted that he was White in order to be able to naturalize in 1922, his counsel argued to the U.S. Supreme Court that "'free white persons' means one not black, not a negro; which does not exclude Japanese" (*Ozawa* v. *United States* 1922). *Lum* v. *Rice* (1927) is the quintessential example of the Asian strategy of disidentifying with Blacks. Arguing that Chinese American Martha Lum ought not to be placed in a segregated Black school, her counsel argued, "If there is danger in the association [with Black students], it is a danger from which one race [Chinese] is entitled to protection just the same as another [Whites]."

All of this changed with the rise of the Asian American Movement in the late 1960s. Inspired by the Black Power Movement, different Asian nationality groups came together on campuses and in communities and fashioned a pan-Asian racial subjectivity for the first time. Instead of claiming Whiteness, Asian American students and community activists proudly proclaimed their own distinct racial identity. Instead of disidentifying with Blacks, Asian Americans actively linked arms with them and other peoples of color at home and abroad under the banner of Third World Solidarity. This

was a self-conscious rejection of the model minority myth's suggestion of Asian political passivity. As the Vietnam War dragged on, Asian Americans, along with their Third World allies, articulated a far-reaching global political analysis, situated their own plight within that broad picture, and adopted a strong stance against White/Western racism, capitalism, and imperialism. It is often remembered that the movement awakened cultural pride in Asians; it is less often recalled that "Asian American" signaled, from the very start, a forceful critique of power and domination and a distinctly oppositional political stance shared by other groups of color. For Asian Americans in the movement, racial identity was unapologetically, irredeemably political.

During the post-civil rights era, for a variety of reasons, the racial identity of Asian Americans has become depoliticized or detached from any particular political stance (Iijima 1997). Many people now embrace an Asian American racial and cultural identity without espousing any of the political beliefs that were originally intertwined with it. Activist Bob Wing, a veteran of the Third World Liberation Front strike at UC Berkeley in 1968, explains: "The whole idea of racial politics or identity politics, I think the meaning is very different now then it was back then [in the 1960s]. . .Back then, it had a social and a political meaning. . .The point was you were against white supremacy as a social system. . . whereas today, I think identity politics has a much stronger individualized meaning. . .it's very personal, very individual" (Wing interview 2002). Today, "Asian American" does not signify a clear political perspective—or, more accurately, it signifies a confusing welter of different political views, from ultraconservative to radical, from assimilationist to oppositional. As Glenn Omatsu notes, "We [Asian Americans] have an ideological vacuum, and activists will compete with neo-conservatives, mainstream conservatives, and others to fill it" (1994).

How did this happen? Clearly, the decline of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the nation's shift toward conservatism thereafter depoliticized racial identities in all communities of color. But the trend has been especially noticeable among Asian Americans, who today identify less with and are less identified with a progressive political agenda than Blacks and Latinos.[5] Not coincidentally, Asian Americans, who are roughly two-thirds foreign-born, are the most internally diverse of these groups by far. In large part,

the ambiguity of Asian American political identity today can be traced to the increasingly diverse class positions that Asians have come to occupy during the past thirty years. Whereas Blacks and, to a lesser degree, Latinos remain shut out of many educational, housing, and employment opportunities, relative valorization practices allow some Asians to access these opportunities and to prosper financially and professionally. Clearly, Whites would rather live among, marry, and hire Asian Americans, on the whole, than they would Blacks. In addition, Asian immigration to the U.S. is distinctively bifurcated: many Asian immigrants are poor and unskilled and end up at the margins of the low-wage service economy, but many others are highly educated, skilled, and affluent. With such disparate statuses, experiences, and resources, it is not surprising that Asian Americans have not spoken with a unified political voice in the post-civil rights era.

Many progressive Asian American advocates and activists strive to teach immigrants and native-born youth about the shared experiences and struggles of communities of color in the U.S. But conservative Whites and Asians are fighting for those same hearts and minds. Consider columnist William McGurn (1991), who praises Asian Americans for rejecting the Black model of demanding special treatment and encourages them to comply quietly with the Republican party agenda. Or Congressman Dana Rohrabacher's attempt to gut affirmative action programs under the guise of helping Asians during the university admissions controversy of the 1980s. Prominent Asian American conservatives, all of whom have built their careers on the repudiation of affirmative action and reification of the model minority myth, concur: Asian Americans should pursue their own advancement and distance themselves from the oppositional politics of other minorities, particularly Blacks. Lance Izumi of the conservative think tank Pacific Research Institute criticizes liberal Asian Americans for adopting a "panminority ideology" that promotes Black and Latino interests at the expense of their own. Izumi considers the biggest threat to Asian Americans to be that posed by "quotas" designed to help Blacks and Latinos (Izumi interview 2002). Columnist Arthur Hu agrees: "The whole idea that we need to discriminate against an Asian because some White guy made a Black person a slave is very hard to understand" (Hu interview 2002). Susan Au Allen, another prominent Asian American conservative, calls the idea of interminority

collaboration "foolish": "Mainstream society has accepted Asian Americans, okay?. . .Why are we leaving them to go to this little group [of minorities]?" (Allen interview 2002). These kinds of views paved the way for the Chinese American Democratic Club to initiate the lawsuit *Brian Ho* v. *San Francisco Unified School District* (1994), which dismantled a desegregation consent decree designed to increase the presence of underrepresented groups (Blacks and Latinos) in the city's schools in order to increase Chinese American enrollment at prestigious Lowell High School.

A quick glance at public opinion data confirms the ambiguity of Asian Americans' political identity. According to the National Asian American Pilot Study, 36 percent of Asian Americans consider themselves to be Democrats, 14 percent Republicans, and 13 percent Independents, while 20 percent do not think in these terms, and 18 percent were uncertain or refused to answer.[6] Eight percent of Asian Americans see themselves as very liberal, 28 percent as somewhat liberal, 32 percent as middle of the road, 18 percent as somewhat conservative, 4 percent as very conservative, and 10 percent are not sure (Lien et al. 2001). Asian Americans fall between Blacks and Whites in their support for affirmative action (Hochschild and Rogers 2000). And while Asians believe Whites discriminate against them to some degree, they feel closer to Whites than they do to either Blacks or Latinos, and closer to Latinos than to Blacks (McClain and Tauber 2001; *Taking America's Pulse II* 2000).

Today, "Asian American" is becoming a descriptive term without clear political content. In the context of this political ambiguity, some seek to define Asian American "empowerment" non-ideologically, as the acquisition of political clout. A glance at the recently formed nonpartisan political action committee, 80/20, suggests how much things have changed since the 1960s, when Asian American activists called for the fundamental restructuring of the polity and economy toward a more equitable distribution of power and resources for all. S.B. Woo, one of 80/20's founders, declines to identify the organization as liberal or conservative: "Politics is not ideology" (Woo interview 2002). For Asian Americans to gain clout, he avers, they must be willing to swing in the direction of either party, depending upon which one has done more for Asian Americans at that point in time. Here Asian American racial identity and interests are seen as independent from any particular political stance or even party affiliation. Are Asian Americans "people of color" or not?

Where Do Asian Americans Stand? Ambiguity and Cross-Racial Alliances

As I mentioned earlier, Asian American advocacy and community organizing groups do a significant amount of cross-racial coalition work today. Many of these coalitions focus on such issues as hate crimes, racial profiling, workers' and immigrants' rights, and affirmative action.[7] Before I examine how the ambiguity of Asian Americans' political identity complicates these coalition efforts, I want to discuss briefly how the organizational and ideological setting of the post-civil rights regime shapes the same. On the one hand, the organizational structure of racial advocacy politics seems to place firm limits on the amount of cross-racial coalition work that can happen.[8] Most advocacy organizations are set up to serve one racial group—think of the NAACP, National Council of La Raza (NCLR), or NAPALC. This means that racial advocacy organizations will inevitably experience some friction with one another as they compete, on behalf of their respective communities, for scarce resources in redistricting, social service provisions, etc. This also means that each organization will build its program priorities around service to its own racial group. Although many Asian American advocates see cross-racial coalition building as a normative goal, they acknowledge that it usually takes a back seat to maintaining and developing programs that serve the Asian community. Phil Ting of the Asian Law Caucus explains: "Coalition building becomes a thing that's nice to have and not as critical to how you do your work at times" (Ting interview 2002). Almost all of the advocates I spoke with said they want to do more cross-racial work, but that time, energy, and resources (all in scarce supply) usually get directed to higher priority items. Patty Wada of the JACL put it this way: "I wish we could do more, but there's only so many hours in the day, and you've got your own programs to do" (Wada interview 2002).

On the other hand, many Asian American civil rights advocates have developed a strong ideological commitment to cross-racial work that mitigates the self-interested orientation of advocacy work. In part, this ideological commitment is rooted in considerations of utility: every person whom I interviewed said that Asian Americans *need* to build cross-racial coalitions in order to get things done because they simply don't have the numbers to do

it themselves. Several mentioned that groups of color have to stick together in defensive solidarity lest they be divided and conquered separately.[9] But for some individuals and organizations, the commitment to cross-racial work is clearly more than a matter of utility; it is a matter of pursuing a broad vision of social and racial justice. The mission statement for Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), for example, is: "to defend and promote the civil and political rights of Chinese and Asian Americans within the context of, and in the interest of, advancing multiracial democracy in the United States."[10]

At times, this philosophical commitment impels Asian American advocates to act altruistically toward other racial groups in an effort to promote racial justice broadly conceived. The CAA spoke out forcefully against the *Brian Ho* lawsuit on the grounds that it unfairly elevated the interests of Chinese American students over all others, especially Blacks and Latinos. In the aftermath of Proposition 187, the Asian Law Caucus incurred the wrath of some of its Asian allies by speaking out for the rights of undocumented immigrants. Gen Fujioka recalls: "We tried to maintain the principled position that we have to address both [undocumented and legal immigrants' issues] even though the Asian communities generally are most concerned, at least on an immediate level, with legal immigration" (Fujioka interview 2002). When Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) took up the plight of enslaved Thai workers in El Monte, California, staff attorney Julie Su made the conscientious decision to broaden the campaign to include Latina sweatshop workers in the garment industry as well, even though this move made the campaign more difficult in many ways.

Let me return to my central theme. In the course of my interviewing, three interrelated dynamics became apparent.[11] First, due to the prevalence of the model minority myth and the ambiguity of Asian American political identity, many civil rights advocates (White, Black, and Latino) seem uncertain (or make mistaken assumptions) about where Asians "fit in," both in terms of how dire their social problems are and where they stand politically. This uncertainty often leads to neglecting or discouraging Asian American organizations as potential coalition partners. Second, some Black leaders in particular express concern that Asian Americans are jumping the civil rights queue, so to speak, or putting their demands for redress ahead of those of Blacks. Third,

Asian American advocates and activists have difficulty mobilizing their own constituency around particular issues because of its diversity and political fragmentation. This means that they have less to bring to the table, which reduces the incentive for others within the civil rights community to include them. Obviously, these dynamics do not prevent cross-racial coalitions from forming, but they do complicate coalition-building efforts.

As Taeku Lee suggests in his paper, "From Myth to Mobilization," the model minority myth continues to have an "unshakable stranglehold" (2002, 3) on public opinion. Most Americans think that Asian Americans are an American "success story," that they are well educated and prosperous, and that they face little, if any, discrimination. During the coalitional effort to diversify television programming, Karen Narasaki of NAPALC ran into this perspective: "I had an argument with a top executive about whether 'chink' was as bad a slur as the others. That's the level we're talking about" (Narasaki interview 2002). In addition, the model minority myth has always depicted Asian Americans as politically docile, and this notion is powerfully reinforced by the ambiguity of Asian American political identity today. Kathay Feng of APALC recalls attending Congressional hearings and having newspaper reporters express surprise that Asian Americans were taking part in those cross-racial coalitions. Non-Asians don't really think of Asian Americans as a "minority," socioeconomically or politically, and Asian Americans are themselves too divided on the matter to convince them otherwise.

Within the civil rights community, too, there seems to be an uncertainty about whether Asian Americans are really "people of color" and the extent to which they are on the same page politically with Blacks and Latinos. According to Feng of APALC, mainstream civil rights groups frequently do not think to include Asian Americans in their coalition work:

> Amongst the civil rights groups that are in power, because they're working within this racial framework [of Black and White] that doesn't know what to do with Asian Americans, they are unsure of how to include our group—if they think about us. . .[Within] a lot of traditional organizations, whether they're civil rights oriented or not, they do not necessarily have Asian Americans as part of their agenda on social justice. And it's not that they're actively trying to ex-

> clude us, to say that, "Oh, Asian Americans shouldn't have a piece of the pie." It comes back to not quite figuring out how we fit in. (Feng interview 2002)

This phenomenon—where civil rights groups overlook and/or exclude Asian Americans because they are not sure where they stand socioeconomically or politically—is especially apparent with regard to affirmative action and welfare. Both issues are central to the progressive political agenda, and Asian Americans have been constructed as opponents of both types of policies by conservative Asians and Whites. Jane Bai of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities explains that Asians were "off the radar" when civil rights groups started to organize in response to the welfare reform act of 1996 in New York City. No one thought to include Asians, and Asian groups themselves made little effort to be included, despite the fact that one segment of the Asian community at least was sure to be adversely affected:

> What we saw happening from the Asian community was somewhat of a silence around [the issue of welfare reform]. And because we work in the Southeast Asian community who per capita have the highest welfare dependency rate, this was clearly a big issue for us. And so we're dealing with. . .the larger landscape and having to deal with how Asians themselves as a group, as a whole, are perceived. And so that means they're either on the radar or off the radar. But also among Asians themselves, they tend to evoke this exceptionalism of Southeast Asians, right? So that was kind of a dual struggle that we had in terms of really trying to put forward an analysis coming from a Southeast Asian perspective. (Bai interview 2002)

Karen Narasaki recounts that she faced a similar uphill battle on the issue of affirmative action. In fact, when NAPALC joined a coalition dedicated to preventing the passage of national anti-affirmative action legislation, some of its coalition partners expressed uncertainty about the status and politics of Asian Americans. In this context Narasaki was concerned that the stereotype of Asian Americans being opposed to affirmative action was masking the truth that most Asian Americans in fact support the policy:

> When the issue first came up and I would say to people, "Okay, I really want to talk about affirmative action," they were scared

> because they were assuming that I wanted to talk to them about why Asians hated it. And I was actually trying to explain to them that we Asians are a lot more complicated than what was then being portrayed by the media and others. . .[I]t was very upsetting because. . .a lot of people were making sweeping statements that weren't accurate, but also they weren't letting Asians speak for themselves. . .I felt really horrible. (Narasaki interview 2002)

According to Kathay Feng, she confronted a similar situation when APALC sought to join the fight against Proposition 209 in California: "It was unclear whether or not Asian Americans should be asked to part of this [coalition]." She continues:

> There has always been an assumption that Asian Americans would oppose affirmative action, because of the "over representation" of Asian Americans in higher education, or, you know, the couple of spotlight individuals who have broken through the glass ceiling and who've made it big. . .[APALC's task] within the civil rights community [was] kind of putting out where Asian American groups stand, and gaining the legitimacy to be able to join the coalition because of that common perception of where Asian Americans stand. (Feng interview 2002)

According to Feng, APALC's coalition partners were willing to include Asian Americans on a superficial level—e.g., getting APALC's endorsement on letters—but did not invite them to participate in the central organizing committee. Like Bai and Narasaki, Feng worked hard to educate other groups about the complicated reality behind the model minority myth.

If many mainstream civil rights organizations appear uncertain or skeptical about the politics of the Asian American community, some Black leaders and advocates have been directly critical of Asian American civil rights claims.[12] As Frank Wu (2002) has noted, power relations in the civil rights arena are almost the obverse of power relations in society as a whole, in the sense that Blacks, as the oldest and (until recently) largest minority group, dominate this arena. Blacks enjoy greater internal coherence than either Latinos or Asians, and they have an unmistakably liberal/progressive political stance as a group. They speak with the most moral authority and frequently take the lead on issues relating to racism.

As the old kids on the block, Black advocacy groups have occasionally expressed criticisms of the two new kids on the block—Latinos and Asian Americans.[13] Black leaders have complained that Latinos and Asians are johnny-come-latelys, jumping on the bandwagon of civil rights and leapfrogging over Blacks without contributing to the struggle or paying their dues (Cruz 2000). According to Toni Morrison's (1995) unforgettable formulation, immigrants climb to success "on the backs of Blacks" and prove their Americanness by adopting anti-Black views. During the Black-Latino conflict over redistricting in Florida, one Black politician said: "We ought to look and see who it was standing on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma getting trampled" (Jaynes 2000, 31). Yet, on the whole, Blacks tend to feel closer to Latinos than they do to Asians (McClain and Tauber 2001; *Taking America's Pulse II* 2000). The perception among many Blacks that Latinos share many of the same problems—that they are "people of color," too—mitigates their criticism of Latinos as self-serving newcomers. So, while Blacks and Latinos experience a good deal of conflict and competition—especially in the areas of electoral politics and redistricting (McClain and Tauber 2001)—there is also a strong sense among many Blacks that Latinos are desirable and natural political allies. This is not necessarily true of Asians.

To begin, some Blacks believe, with some justification, that Asians are treated as "honorary" Whites or are granted certain privileges that allow them to leapfrog over Blacks. Of all racial groups, Blacks are the most likely to think that Asian Americans face no barriers to getting ahead—44 percent, compared with 38 percent of Whites and 22 percent of Latinos (Lee 2002). This viewpoint has been expressed repeatedly by Black activists during episodes of Black-Korean conflict in Los Angeles, New York City, and elsewhere (Kim 2000). In addition, many Blacks feel that Asian Americans have taken a conservative stand politically, that they have responded to what Guinier and Torres (2002) call "the racial bribe" by trying to be White and distancing themselves from Blacks à la Gong Lum.

Thus it is not surprising that Black advocates occasionally react to Asian American civil rights claims without enthusiasm. To repeat, in the eyes of some Black leaders, Asian Americans have not suffered as greatly or for as long as Blacks, yet they have been free-riders on the Black struggle and are now passing by Blacks, concerned only for themselves and not for any larger vision of racial

justice. Several interviewees mentioned having to negotiate around some variant of this perspective on the part of Black leaders. "It's always been a more difficult proposition working with the African American community," says John Tateishi of the JACL, because of "[Black] resentment that, 'These people are new in our country and yet they're owning stores, they're getting better jobs, they're getting an education" (Tateishi interview 2002). Stewart Kwoh of APALC comments: "Sometimes people think, 'Oh, Asian Americans are just concerned about themselves, and they're trying to take over a certain area'"; or else people wonder whether Asians "are in tune with their needs or. . .just totally consumed about [their own] interests and our own agendas" (Kwoh interview 2002). Henry Der, formerly of Chinese for Affirmative Action, recalls: "From time to time, I got the sense, 'Where were you when we African Americans needed someone to speak out?'" (Der interview 2002). Karen Narasaki of NAPALC adds:

> You can see how [Black leaders] would feel like, you know, "We've been here, we've been trying to break through, we've been trying to eradicate institutional discrimination and gain opportunities. You guys are kind of just waltzing in and taking advantage of all that work and not acknowledging the work that was done." (Narasaki interview 2002)

Kwoh acknowledges that many Asian Americans, the majority of whom are foreign-born, do not understand their own debt and connection to the Black struggle:

> Once in a while, I'm asked around Martin Luther King's birthday, "Why should Asian Americans celebrate that?" It's usually by a Chinese or Asian ethnic newspaper reporter. . . . And I ask them, "Well, when did your family come to the United States?" Most Asian Americans are foreign-born. The vast majority of the foreign-born came in after 1970. And the reason that they were able to come in is because of the 1965 immigration law changes which changed eighty years of either outright exclusion or severe discriminatory restrictions. And, but for the civil rights movement, there wouldn't have been a change. I've read the legislative history, I'm convinced that there would not have been a change. . .And so, what did we get out of it? Probably two-thirds of our population. Yet, some Asian Americans have no sense. They don't know what the civil rights movement did for them. (Kwoh interview 2002)

Educating the Asian community about its connections to the Black struggle is part of what APALC and other like-minded groups see as their mission.

The issue of Japanese American reparations brought some of these tensions out in the open. In the mid-1980s, John Tateishi, who was then director of the redress movement, made the rounds to solicit support from civil rights organizations. He ran into resistance from one prominent Black leader who expressed strong reservations about reparations for Japanese Americans—not because he thought the cause was unjust but because he felt that Japanese Americans, who had suffered less than Blacks and for a shorter time, were jumping ahead of Blacks in the redress queue. Tateishi recalls this leader's comments:

> [He] said, "It ain't going to happen until we get our forty acres and a mule." And frankly, I was really pissed off. And I just said, "Are you telling me you're not going to support this until you get what you want and we can't get what we think is right?" And he said, "It ain't going to happen until we get our forty acres and a mule." I tried to separate the issues and say, "Look, the fact that you got screwed has nothing to do with us. And it's not going to take away from what you're going to be doing." But there was a lot of resentment, that we as a small population having gone through this experience that only took three years of our lives when we're talking about an entire population and a whole generation suffering and every generation subsequent. There was some resentment that we would even try something this bold. (Tateishi 2002)

This Black leader's references to "forty acres and a mule"—the historic promise that the federal government made to freed slaves during Reconstruction and never followed through on—convey his sense that the U.S. government owed Blacks a great debt, and that it should honor that debt before repaying others.

The perception among some Blacks that Asians get preferential treatment and that their political activism is somehow suspect surfaced again during the controversy in the Doublerock public housing projects in San Francisco in the 1990s.[14] In the early 1990s, pursuant to a HUD order to promote racial integration, the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) moved a number of Southeast Asian (Vietnamese and Cambodian) families into predominantly Black projects. The Southeast Asian families became targets of

systematic harassment and violence—including graffiti, rock throwing, name calling, theft, and serious assault—by some of the Black residents. The Asian Law Caucus brought several lawsuits against the SFHA on behalf of the Southeast Asian families. In addition, recognizing the larger problem of violence in the projects, the Asian Law Caucus worked to organize both Black and Asian tenants to improve safety in the projects and represented both Asian and Black tenants in SFHA administrative proceedings. Eventually, the Asian Law Caucus gained Section 8 federal subsidy vouchers that enabled some of the Southeast Asian families to move out of the projects.

In the eyes of some of the Black tenants, the initial arrival of the Southeast Asian families in the projects had already suggested preferential treatment from the city—how else could one explain their sudden rise to the top of the long waiting list? The Section 8 vouchers seemed to confirm that notion, since many Blacks requesting transfer due to medical illness or domestic violence had been on the Section 8 waiting list for a long time. SFHA director Ronnie Davis, a Black appointee of Mayor Willie Brown, added fuel to the fire when he accused Asians of exaggerating claims of racial violence in order to jump ahead in the Section 8 queue. When some of the SFHA attorneys who were Black met with Asian Law Caucus attorneys, they said, "The problem with you is your people just don't want to live with Blacks"(Fujioka interview 2002). Mayor Brown himself went so far as to publicly charge the Asian Law Caucus with racism. At one of his weekly press conferences he said, "When you file a lawsuit and do it for one class of people, I think you're practicing racism in the worst way" (Johnson 1998). Gen Fujioka, one of the lead Caucus attorneys in the Doublerock cases, thought Black leaders acted to protect their political turf and middle-class interests by playing the race card: "If you get down to it, the Housing Authority [and the housing projects]. . .in San Francisco, they're run as. . .plantations. . .They're run like, 'This is our base, and we're going to keep it that way'"(Fujioka interview 2002). The Doublerock story is an object lesson in how difficult it is for Asian advocates to negotiate around perceptions of Asian privilege and political selfishness, especially when those in power are veterans of the same struggle for civil rights and racial equality.[15]

The ambiguity of Asian Americans' political identity complicates coalition building in one final way. The fact that Asian advo-

cates cannot necessarily "deliver" their constituency on particular issues, due to the political fragmentation of the community, means that they have less to offer to coalition partners—and that their partners have less incentive to overcome their other reservations about working with them. Karen Narasaki of NAPALC agrees that Asians' lack of internal unity makes cross-racial coalition building that much harder: "If you're working in coalition, it's because you represent some constituency. . .You're there because you have resources, perspectives to bring to the table. . .If your community's too fragmented, then you're not really representing anything" (Narasaki interview 2002). Kathay Feng comments:

> It's a disturbing reality to have to admit that Asian Americans are—certainly from the eyes of the mainstream organizers—seen as junior partners. . .I think that is borne of the fact that our racial lens that we see the world through is Black and White. I think it's also borne of the fact that Asian American voters are an unknown quantity. So, for a lot of organizers, there's this very Machiavellian calculation. . .Candidates, campaigns, organizers think, if you penetrate the African American community, they may only be eight percent of the population, but they're one hundred percent going to vote. And if you penetrate the Latino community, damn, they're thirty-five percent, so even if only half of them vote, that's a fairly large percentage. . .If you penetrate the Asian American community, you're going to deal with like twenty different languages, you don't know if they're Democrat or Republican, you don't know if they're going to vote. . .they're just this unknown quantity. . .[Especially] if you're talking about more immigrant communities, it's such a wild card that these campaigns kind of make a calculation, "If we're going to invest our money. . .Asian Americans are going to get the smallest piece of the pie." (Feng interview 2002)

Clearly, part of what makes Asian Americans an "unknown quantity," as Feng points out, is that so many are immigrants who may not be naturalized or registered to vote. But part of the story, too, is the lack of clarity about where Asian Americans stand politically. Again, the result might not be complete exclusion from a coalition, but simply the relative neglect of Asian Americans within the coalition. Feng recalls occasions on which she asked a coalition's core planning committee for funds to run media ads in or provide language translation for the Asian community, only to

be told that all of the funds were already spent. . .but that Asian groups were welcome to raise the money themselves!

Taking a Stand and Organizing Asian Communities: KIWA and CAAAV

I have argued that the contemporary political identity of Asian Americans is up for grabs among conservative White and Asian American voices, coalition-minded advocacy groups, and others. Whether and to what degree Asian Americans are "people of color," with all that that implies politically, is hotly contested. This lack of clarity about where Asians fit in and where they stand—about whether they are out for themselves alone or embrace a broader multiracial vision of social change and racial justice—complicates cross-racial coalition building and aggravates racial conflict. So what is to be done? Omatsu suggests that certain grassroots organizing projects currently underway in Asian communities across the country might serve as inspiration for "a political strategy and a new moral vision" for politically concerned Asian Americans (1994, 52). With this in mind, I want to discuss briefly the work of two grassroots community organizing groups: Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) in Los Angeles and CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities in New York City.[16] Both groups have adopted clear political analyses and stances based upon the perspective of the most oppressed Asian Americans—low-income immigrant workers. Their explicit political commitment to challenging power and domination and restructuring society in the direction of greater equality and justice neutralizes the perception of Asian American political ambiguity and facilitates the development of deep, organic, and enduring cross-racial work with Blacks and Latinos, not just at the elite level but at the community level as well.

KIWA, which was established in the early 1990s in Los Angeles' Koreatown, is an example of a new kind of labor organizing strategy (Omatsu 1995). Traditional unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO have largely ignored workers in Koreatown and other ethnic enclaves. Yet these workers are exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation and abuse both because labor laws are often not enforced in enclave workplaces and because the workers, due to language and cultural barriers, often do not know their rights. KIWA was set up to serve these workers. Its mission:

> To empower low wage immigrant workers and to develop a progressive constituency and leadership amongst low wage immigrant workers in Los Angeles that can join the struggle in solidarity with other underrepresented communities for social change and justice.[17]

KIWA provides services to individual workers and organizes collective action campaigns to pressure employers to rectify various wrongs, including but not limited to the nonpayment of wages, the payment of subminimum wages, refusal to improve substandard and dangerous working conditions, and firing workers who engage in organizing. As a community-based movement geared toward broad economic justice issues, KIWA differs from a traditional labor union that is focused on organizing workplaces one site at a time. Also, since formal labor contracts (the focus of traditional union work) are not feasible with the "mom and pop" stores in Koreatown, KIWA pushes employers to raise wages and improve working conditions and then monitors compliance in various ways.

From the start, KIWA has been a trailblazer in cross-racial work. As its mission statement suggests, it seeks to generate worker solidarity (across racial, gender, and national lines) as a means to both empower individual workers in their daily lives and build a progressive movement for social and economic justice. Launched in 1997, KIWA's Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign, which sought to raise sub-minimum wages and improve substandard working conditions in Koreatown restaurants, organized large numbers of both Korean and Latino workers. (According to Paul Lee of KIWA, the restaurant workers in Koreatown are 30 percent Korean and 70 percent Latino.) To appreciate this accomplishment, one need only keep in mind that most of the restaurant workers were newly arrived Korean immigrant women and Mexican men, two groups who do not automatically see each other as allies. KIWA's current Market Workers Justice Campaign continues the tradition of cross-racial organizing. KIWA has Latino organizers on staff and it does everything—from designing its website to conducting meetings to drawing protest banners—in three languages: English, Korean, and Spanish. In addition to organizing campaigns around immigrant rights, KIWA does coalition work with Black and Latino groups on issues such as affirmative action and welfare reform be-

cause "we [KIWA] want to be part of a broader social justice movement" (Lee interview 2002).

KIWA's clear political orientation and emphasis on class solidarity enable it to engage in cross-racial work that is deeper, more extensive, and broader in scope than many of the coalitions mentioned thus far. Moving away from race as the paramount organizing principle, KIWA redefines who is friend (all poor, marginalized people of color at home and abroad) and who is foe (business interests of whatever color who profit from the exploitation and abuse of workers at home and abroad). KIWA organizers see race as an important axis of domination, yet at the same time much of their work involves disrupting knee-jerk race loyalties or nationalisms—e.g., in order to persuade Korean workers and Latino workers that they should join forces against their Korean boss. Through organizing work, KIWA is able to generate a powerful sense of political solidarity and linked fate between Korean and Latino workers. As Paul Lee observes, interracial tensions occasionally emerge at the start of campaigns, but "that kind of stuff goes out the window very quickly" once the groups' shared political and material interests are clarified. Eventually, campaigns generate an organic unity that transcends differences and prefigures the kind of community that organizers envision:

> Each group [Koreans and Latinos] starts out—their point of departure is—they're just working in a place, both understanding that both are facing abuse. They see it in each other in the workplace. And through the campaigns we've seen how the two groups really kind of gel. We [KIWA] facilitate that process because we're able to provide the translation and the clarification of cultural issues and language, you know, and unique aspects of this ethnic enclave barrier situation, so that both groups begin to understand one another better and are better able to fully support one another in a holistic way. (Lee interview 2002)

KIWA's promotion of worker solidarity and cross-racial work extends across national lines as well.

When KIWA joined forces with the predominantly Latino Local 11 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union in Los Angeles to influence how Korean-owned hotels in the city treated their employees, it was able to call upon its progressive and union allies in Korea for support.

In addition, KIWA has fought to improve the plight of workers in Korean-owned *maquiladoras* in Mexico and elsewhere, drawing upon its allies in Korea to "help support labor movements and workers struggles in Latin America." Some Koreatown leaders are baffled and infuriated by KIWA's strategies. When KIWA boycotted the Korean-owned Baek Hwa Jung restaurant in 1998 on behalf of workers who happened to be all Latinos, business interests called KIWA organizers "race traitors." Paul Lee recounts: "They were saying, 'How could a Korean group come out in support of Latinos. . .against a Korean employer?" (Lee interview 2002). In resisting the conservatizing force of Korean nationalism and reaching across racial, gender, and national lines, KIWA pursues a "deliberate political strategy of building a base in the Korean community from which to set forth a progressive agenda" (Nguyen 2001, 27).

CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities opened its doors in 1986 in New York City. CAAAV organizes poor Asian immigrant communities across the city with the goal of enhancing their capacity for self-determination and contributing to a broader multiracial movement for social change. Some of its main programs involve mobilizing Chinatown residents to resist displacement caused by gentrification and organizing domestic workers around issues such as amnesty, occupational safety, and health care. CAAAV members see race as one axis of domination but by no means the only one. According to Jane Bai of CAAAV, members analyze issues "at the intersection of White supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy" and clearly "com[e] from the perspective and the orientation of the people who are the oppressed"—especially those marginalized by mainstream notions of citizenship, such as the incarcerated, undocumented workers, and immigrant welfare mothers (Bai interview 2002).

A hallmark of CAAAV's work is its emphasis on conceptualizing the big political and economic picture, highlighting the operation of power, seeing how things fit together, and articulating linkages among issues that might otherwise seem unconnected. Sustaining this emphasis is possible because CAAAV members engage in frequent and intense political analysis and discussion with one another, carrying out the process of ideological clarification and refinement in connection with changing conditions in the communities they serve. CAAAV members see anti-Asian vio-

lence not as random or isolated "hate crimes" but as a symptom of broader patterns of systematic, state-sanctioned, institutional violence that afflicts low-wage immigrant workers and other marginalized groups and that also manifests itself as exploitation in the workplace, police brutality, and draconian INS detention and deportation policies. Since the articulation of linkages can show previously isolated constituencies what they have in common, it is a powerful cross-racial mobilizing tool. CAAAV's work in naming the connections between the operation of the prison industrial complex and the (newly expanded) powers of the INS, for example, has helped to create common ground between two efforts that have been traditionally estranged: the immigrant rights and racial justice movements.

CAAAV's clear and forcefully articulated political stance helps it to engage in deep and enduring cross-racial work. Rather than coalescing with Black and Latino partners for a short time around a particular issue, it builds an ongoing solidarity with its partners that is grounded on fundamental political affinity and agreement. Consider the Coalition Against Police Brutality (CAPB), for example, co-founded in 1997 by CAAAV, the Audre Lorde Project, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Justice Committee of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, and Forever in Struggle Together. CAPB formed in response to the escalating violence against communities of color on the part of the NYPD, but as Jane Bai explains, "while its focus seems like it's only on police brutality. . .how we actually built our relationship over the years was through an analysis that was much broader than just police brutality; it was understanding it within these larger global frameworks." While inter-group misunderstandings occasionally arise, they are easily overcome because all of the coalition partners are on the same page, politically speaking. Bai comments on the fact that CAPB is still going strong in 2002:

> I don't think any of us knew what kind of animal this coalition was going to be. . .It's not really like a coalition, because it's not like we've had an identifiable campaign that we've come together around with a clear beginning and an end. . . There's a lot of mutual accountability among the different groups, so that even if it's not a CAPB-specific issue, we check in with each other. So, you know, if somebody is calling some demonstration or something, we will check in with each other.

> "Have you heard about this? What do you think about this?" And so we share information. The other thing is that we have this understood policy that there'll be certain things that CAPB is going to endorse, but then there're certain things that we leave up to the individual organization. . .And because there's such a high level of political unity and trust that was built over time, that hasn't been a source of tension. (Bai interview 2002)

Although CAAAV had always paid attention to global context, in the late 1990s its members began a conscious process of clarifying their analysis of how their organizing work fit into a global framework. After CAAAV and other groups of color coined the term "Third World Within" in a joint statement issued during the November 2000 anti-globalization protests in Washington, DC, CAPB launched the Third World Within (TWW), a "network of NYC-based People of Color Organizations that seeks to make connections between People of Color in the U.S. and Third World peoples who struggle against a new global violence" associated with the intensification of race and gender oppression under global restructuring.[18] One of TWW's goals is to establish a presence for people of color within the emergent global protests against the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization. Last year, it sent a delegation to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia in Durban, South Africa.

Both KIWA and CAAAV believe they have something to contribute to a broad discussion about Asian American politics and identity. Both would like to see an immigrant and working-class perspective foregrounded in the Asian American political agenda. Jane Bai of CAAAV talks about creating an alternative perspective and vision within the Asian American community:

> It's pretty common to find that in particular communities. . .it's a conservative voice and a conservative agenda that get the loudest play. And so for us, it was about how do we provide an alternative pole for people in the community to gravitate towards and to not feel like this is the only representation of our experiences. And so creating a left pole was about being able to put forward a vision of what it is that we believe in based on our principles and analysis, based on our experiences, and a vision, based on how we think society should be. (Bai interview 2002)

Although these grassroots organizing groups occasionally work together with advocacy groups like APALC or Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), there is not much political dialogue going on between the two. Some activists, including Jane Bai of CAAAV, express hope that more dialogue, mutual engagement, and collaboration will take place across ideological and organizational lines within the Asian American community. Undoubtedly, differences in organizations' worldviews, which often translate into different policy positions, make this kind of dialogue difficult. Also, when members of each organization are working hard on their own programs, dialogue with differently oriented Asian American groups can seem like a luxury. But is it really?

In Search of a Contemporary Asian American Political Identity

Asian Americans stand, as Karen Narasaki puts it, at a "delicate moment in time." Demographic shifts portend a growth in the Asian American population and, correspondingly, a proliferation of competitive urban conflicts between Asians and other communities of color. There will be more incidents like the Lowell High School controversy and the Doublerock imbroglio, and these may well make cross-racial alliances more difficult to build and sustain. The questions raised above—about where Asians fit in and where they stand politically, whether they are "people of color," and whether they are driven by self-interest alone or by a broader vision of social justice—will not fade away but will be raised with increasing frequency and urgency in the near future. Who will provide the answers to these questions: conservative Whites with an agenda of racial retrenchment or Asian Americans themselves? In my view, generating intra-community discussion across ideological and organizational boundaries about what "Asian American" means politically is not a luxury but an idea whose time has come.

What would happen if politically concerned Asian Americans were to engage in an energetic discussion about these issues? One possibility is that we will conclude that our internal diversity prevents us from staking out a unified political stance. Elevating pluralism above other values, we will agree to use "Asian American" as a primarily descriptive term with little if any political content. We will seek the advancement of Asian Americans in all ar-

eas of life, promote the election and appointment of Asian Americans to office, and defend Asian Americans against any and all forms of discrimination—all without staking out a clear political agenda or vision. When conservative Whites attempt to use us a wedge against other groups of color, we will protest. When other groups of color express reservations about our civil rights claims, we will reassure them that we are victims, too. When the president nominates a conservative Asian American with anti-affirmative action and anti-labor politics to his cabinet, we will stay neutral or maybe even applaud the nomination for furthering "diversity."

Another possibility is that we will follow Chris Iijima's exhortation to recapture "the progressive content of [our] racial identity (1997, 50)" and listen to Yuri Kochiyama's rallying cry, "Serve the people at the bottom. . .the people at the top don't need your help!"[19] Elevating justice over other values, we will start from the perspective of the most marginalized Asian Americans, analyze the global dynamics that reproduce and intensify patterns of domination and inequality, and fashion a political agenda that links us with progressives in other communities of color at home and abroad in a solidaristic movement for meaningful social change. We will understand what activist Bob Wing means when he says: "We are all really in the same boat here. We're not in different row boats and we're gonna hook the rowboats together. We're all really in the same boat and we'd better figure out how to steer it" (Wing interview 2002). We will proactively educate our own communities, other groups of color, and the White majority about where we fit in and where we stand. We will come out forcefully and as a united community against the above-mentioned cabinet nomination as antithetical to the interests of low-wage Asian immigrants and other people of color struggling to survive. Instead of saying "we will not be used,"[20] we will make it a lot harder for anyone to do so. "Asian American," in this scenario, will once again mean something politically.

Whatever the outcome, a debate over these and other possibilities seems well worth having.

Notes

I would like to express my thanks to Don Nakanishi for his advice and to all of my interviewees for their willingness to talk with me.

1. Progressive Whites are often part of these coalitions as well, but

my focus will be on alliances among groups of color.

2. A list of interviewees and their organizational affiliations is at the end of the article. I have edited interview excerpts slightly in order to make them more readable, but not to the extent of changing their meaning. I selected interviewees who are well known advocates of particular political perspectives and/or representatives of prominent Asian American advocacy and community groups. I selected a range of groups to discuss: some are national, others are local; some are nonpartisan, others are explicitly progressive; some focus on litigation and legislation, others on community organizing and/or collective action, etc. One anonymous reviewer for this journal pointed out that most of my interviewees are Chinese and Japanese Americans and queried what this said about the leadership of Asian America today. Do individuals from these Asian ethnicities/national origins dominate Asian America today, influencing the content and articulation of Asian American political identity to a greater extent than, say, Southeast Asian Americans? This is an important question that has hung over Asian American politics since the 1960s, but I do not address it directly in this article.
3. A shortage of staff time, energy, and organizational resources was the single most frequently cited barrier to doing more cross-racial coalition work.
4. Although Latinos are technically classified as "White," their racialization is similar in many ways to that of Asian Americans.
5. While Latinos are also more internally diverse than Blacks and take more conservative views on some social issues than the latter, they are (with the exception of Cuban Americans) solidly Democratic and share many social, economic, and educational difficulties with Blacks.
6. Note that these figures add up to 101 percent, an error found in the original text.
7. To mention just a handful of examples from the past decade: many Asian American groups joined cross-racial alliances dedicated to defeating Propositions 187 and 209 in California; the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC) joined with Latino groups in the fight to restore benefits and services stripped from legal immigrants by the welfare reform law of 1996; the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) led a multifaceted campaign to free enslaved Thai sweatshop workers in El Monte, California and to push for broader reforms affecting both Asian and Latina workers in the garment industry; Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) recently opened a satellite office in Visitacion Valley, California in order to facilitate inter-group relations between the rapidly growing Chinese immigrant population and the Black population there; the Asian Law Caucus was part of the Racial Justice Coalition which

sought to pressure California Governor Gray Davis into signing legislation mandating the collection of data on racial profiling in law enforcement within the state; and in the wake of 9/11, the JACL has reached out to Muslim and South Asian communities and asserted strong leadership in the fight to preserve civil liberties.

8. Certain institutional structures in the post-civil rights regime facilitate cross-racial work. One example is the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), a coalition of more than 185 groups representing groups of color, women, labor, religious groups, gays and lesbians, etc. The LCCR constitutes a very important network of shared resources for its member organizations.
9. Both Patty Wada of the JACL and Stewart Kwoh of APALC made direct mention of the famous poem from the Holocaust by Pastor Niemoller that begins, "First they came for the Jews,/But I did not speak out,/Because I was not a Jew. . ."
10. From CAA's website, http://www.caasf.org as of September 4, 2002.
11. This article is part of a larger research project for which I am also interviewing Black and Latino advocates and community leaders about their views on cross-racial coalition-building. Since I did not interview Black and Latino leaders for this article, I am provisionally grounding my claims about the wariness of other minority groups (especially Blacks) about Asian American political identity on other kinds of data, including published works (Lee 2002, McClain and Tauber 2001, Kim 2000), testimony of Asian American interviewees who have confronted this wariness, and descriptions of real-life conflicts in which other minority leaders have spoken or acted publicly in ways that reflect this kind of wariness. Piecing together this kind of data, the evidence that Black leaders express this kind of wariness is substantial; the evidence that Latino leaders do is much sparser and more anecdotal.
12. See Johnson (1997) and Saito (1998) for discussion of why Asians and Latinos are frequent coalition partners. As immigrant groups, Asians and Latinos share concerns about bilingual education, language discrimination, immigrant rights, immigration policy, etc. They also frequently live in proximity to one another, which makes cooperation in redistricting an imperative. Finally, they both share the status of being the new kids on the block in the civil rights and political arenas.
13. Asian Americans are also the small kid on the block—at least in Washington, DC. According to Karen Narasaki of NAPALC, her organization has a budget of about $1.6 million, while the Urban League, for instance, has a budget of approximately $60 million.
14. Some of the information in this paragraph is based upon Ancheta (1998) and Chang (undated).
15. Latino elected officials have also, on occasion, shut down Asian

American civil rights claims in order to protect their own power. According to Kathay Feng, when APALC and Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) cooperated in drawing State Assembly redistricting maps for the San Gabriel Valley last year, incumbent Democratic Latino legislators did not like the proposal for the 49th district—where the incumbent is Asian American Judy Chu—and blasted MALDEF for compromising Latino electoral interests. They also punished APALC by cutting Monterey Park in half at the Senate level, thus diluting Asian American voting influence and reducing Judy Chu's prospects for a Senate seat.

16. The group was originally named Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence.
17. From KIWA's website, http://www.kiwa.org/e/homain.html as of July 15, 2002.
18. From CAAAV's website, http://www.caaav.org as of August 22, 2002.
19. Kochiyama spoke these words at the Serve the People Conference held at UCLA in May 1998.
20. This is the title of Mari Matsuda's famous article (1993).

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